DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 394 696 PS 024 133

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TITLE Parents' Perspectives on Teaching and Learning: Implications for Changing Curriculum and Classroom Practice.
PUB DATE 17 Apr 95
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the International Roundtable Center on Families, Schools, and Children's Learning (San Francisco, CA, April 17, 1995).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Environment; *Classroom Techniques; Curriculum Evaluation; *Educational Innovation; *English Curriculum; *High Schools; Large Group Instruction; *Learning Processes; *Parent Attitudes; Secondary Education; Small Group Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Curriculum Choice; *Curriculum Emphases; Parent Interview

ABSTRACT

Noting the importance of including parents in school change, this descriptive study investigates parents' beliefs about teaching and learning high school English. Twenty-five parents of high school students enrolled in an untracked interdisciplinary English course were interviewed. Participants were shown photographs of different classrooms and asked to comment on the most conducive learning environment. Subjects were also asked what should be included in the English curriculum and what they considered to be the best learning strategies for students. Data revealed that, in general, parents' perspectives are complex and idiosyncratic. Parents believed that reading and writing should form the core of the high school English program and that students would learn best if actively involved in the learning process. Subjects held opposing views about the inclusion of certain curricula (such as the classics), the value of English as an interdisciplinary course, and whether students could learn best in a heterogeneously- or homogeneously-grouped class. Other differences pertained to inclusion of certain authors, such as Shakespeare, use of various teaching methods, and whether curriculum and methods should be differentiated to suit the needs and interests of specific students. The basis by which parents explained their preferences and the criteria they used to evaluate practices were also assessed. Parents' opposition to some innovative classroom practices was often due to their misunderstanding of a practice or its implementation, rather than because it conflicted with their basic beliefs about teaching and learning. The results of the study suggest that educators need to include parents more directly in the change process and view them as potential learners rather than critics. (BAC)

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ED 394 696

PARENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON TEACHING AND LEARNING: IMPLICATIONS FOR CHANGING CURRICULUM AND CLASSROOM PRACTICE

Paper presented at the International Roundtable
Center on Families, Schools, and Children's Learning
San Francisco, California
April 17, 1995

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PARENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON TEACHING AND LEARNING IMPLICATIONS FOR CHANGING CURRICULUM AND CLASSROOM PRACTICE

Abstract: *Scholars argue that parents must be involved in school change and previous research indicates that parents favor traditional practices, but few studies have been conducted with parents of high school students. This study investigated parents' beliefs about teaching and learning English. Interviews conducted with parents of students in an untracked interdisciplinary course in a small high school showed that their perspectives were complex and idiosyncratic. The study suggests that educators might win parents' support for change by finding out what parents actually think, focusing discussion more on process than outcomes, and creating opportunities for parents to learn about new practices.*

Because parents are important stakeholders whose support for change is essential (Sarason, 1982; Fullan, 1982, 1991), educators who are now engaged in efforts to restructure the high school classroom are faced with the dual challenge of finding ways to involve parents in the change process and to develop their support for and understanding of innovative classroom practices.

These tasks may be particularly difficult at the high school level for two reasons. First, parents are less likely to be involved with high schools than with elementary schools (Jennings, 1990). Second, research indicates that parents generally favor traditional classroom practices. Wilhite (1973) reports that parents are likely to be a barrier to change because they tend to disapprove of "educational practices different from those they experienced in school" (p. 228).

Yet, even though understanding people's beliefs is "*a necessary pre-condition for engaging in any change effort with them*" (Fullan, 1982, p. 120. Emphasis in the original), few studies have been done to find out what parents think about instructional practices. Thus, the goal of the study reported in this paper was to investigate how parents believed their children could best learn in a high school English class.

This paper will focus on the explanations parents gave to explain their preferences for or opposition to the practice of having students work together in small groups--what educators refer to as "cooperative" or "collaborative" learning. These explanations show that parents' perspectives are complex and idiosyncratic and perhaps not as traditional as one might think. Their opposition to certain innovative classroom practice was often due to their misunderstanding of a practice or the way it had been implemented rather than because it conflicted with their basic beliefs about teaching and learning.

This study suggests that educators engaged in restructuring the classroom need to include parents more directly in the change process, and to remember that they can be learners, too. They are likely to be more successful in winning parents' support for innovative classroom practices if they find out what parents actually think or need to know, focus discussion more on process than outcomes, and create meaningful opportunities for parents to learn about and personally experience new practices.

Study Design and Methodology

For this descriptive case study (Patton, 1980) I interviewed 25 parents of students in grade 11 who were enrolled in an untracked interdisciplinary English course in a small high school in Southern Maine. Educators there had already been engaged in restructuring efforts, but they had not yet included parents in the process when the interviews were conducted in the spring of 1993. Participants were asked what they thought students should learn in a high school English class and how they could best learn.

The residents of Eastland (a pseudonym) with a population of just under 7000 were a mix of mostly white (99.1%) working-class and professional families. According to the 1990 U.S. Census data, only 2.5% of the families in Eastland lived below the poverty line as compared with 8% in Maine as a whole. The school district educated about 1000 students K-12; 260 of them were enrolled at Eastland High School.

Even though these parents had not been involved in Eastland High School's restructuring efforts, they probably had knowledge of some innovative practices. Since the early 1970s Eastland parents had been given the option of enrolling their children in an ungraded elementary program. In the early 1980s the middle school shifted from a junior high-type program to one based on the middle school philosophy: teachers met as grade-level teams, students were heterogeneously grouped, and the curriculum included some interdisciplinary units.

The children of the parents who participated in this study were enrolled in two-period, heterogeneously-grouped American Studies classes, a required course for all grade 11 students. The history teacher and the English teacher had integrated history and English to the point where students were given a combined syllabus; they used the two-period time block quite flexibly. All students in the course covered the same basic material, but the assignments were sometimes differentiated to meet the needs of students with different levels of ability.

To be sure that the sample generally represented the range of parents with regard to socio-economic status and educational background, I asked the guidance counselor to use descriptors I provided and decide which of three categories best characterized each student's family on a list of all students enrolled in grade 11. The participants, who were randomly selected from each of these categories, represented a wide range--from one parent who dropped out of school in fourth grade to one with two advanced degrees.

To make parents comfortable, I conducted the interviews in their homes or, in two cases, at other sites parents chose. I began by showing them nine photocopied photographs of different classrooms, such as one with a teacher in front of class and another of students in small groups. I asked them to comment: which photos looked like classes in which their children would be likely to learn (or not learn) English and why. Then they were asked what content should be included in English and how students could best learn it. After they had described the ideal English class, they were asked how much they thought their children's present class was like their ideal class.

The data analysis followed many of the procedures and techniques recommended by Strauss and Corbin (1990) for grounded theory research. The first phase was primarily descriptive and provided a basis for later examining the data at a more abstract level. Using the interview transcripts, I categorized parents' preferred practices for teaching reading/literature and writing in a series of charts and did frequency counts. Then their explanations were further analyzed to determine the likely basis for and the criteria parents used to evaluate the practices they preferred.

Of the three major limitations of this study, the fact that the data was collected entirely from interviews probably had the greatest effect on the results. Only one interview was conducted with each parent, and the interviews varied. As in any qualitative study, the researcher's social position and personal beliefs also influenced both the data collection and analysis (Mishler, 1986). Several procedures, including the use of peer reviewers (Merriam, 1988) who provided feedback on the data analysis, were employed to minimize the effects of researcher bias and to make the study as valid and reliable as possible. Finally, this study was limited by the small number of parents included although the parents of 38.7% of the students in grade 11 were interviewed.

In the next section I will provide a brief summary of the practices these parents preferred and the evaluative criteria they appeared to be using to provide a context for later presenting their views about students working in small groups.

Preferred Practices and Evaluative Criteria

These parents said that reading and writing should form the core of the high school English program because students would need knowledge and skills in these areas in order to get along in school and in the real world. Even the reason they most often cited for the third most important area of study, what some call "the basics," such as grammar, was a pragmatic one: grammar study will help students to better express themselves in speaking and writing. Because they recognized that the world was different than it was when they went to school, they thought that students would learn best if they were more active participants in the learning process than was the case in the highly-structured, teacher-dominated classrooms most of them remembered. Yet classrooms should look like classrooms. The desks did not have to be in rows, but many parents said there was no place for a couch in a classroom.

Parents held opposing views only about the inclusion of certain curriculum, such as the classics; the value of English as an interdisciplinary course; and whether students could best learn in a heterogeneously- or homogeneously-grouped class. A majority of parents (56%) said that students would learn best in a class which was heterogeneously grouped as long as the needs of individual students were addressed. They were less certain about the value of learning English as part of an interdisciplinary course. Fewer than half (48%) said it was a good idea to combine the study of English with history. The others, a majority, were either critical of or confused about their children's current American Studies class.

Other differences were not so much in the kinds of practices they preferred but rather the extent to which they believed certain curriculum should be included or emphasized, that teachers should use certain methods, or that curriculum and methods should be differentiated to suit the needs and interests of particular groups or individual students. For example, parents said that it was very important for students to be given opportunities to express their opinions and that discussion, either as a whole class or in small groups, was the best method for doing this. However, they had different opinions about the benefits of discussion in small groups and the amount of class time students should spend in small groups. Some parents said that while it would be good for college-bound students to read Shakespeare, such content was not desirable for students who might work in a gas station after high school. The fact that parents' preferences appeared to differ more in degree than in kind held true even with the parent whose views were most divergent. The ideal learning environment for him was one which would be personally designed for each individual student rather than for certain groups of students and would enable students to learn through interdisciplinary projects not only in the classroom but also in the community.

The Basis for Their Preferences

When parents explained their preferences for or opposition to certain practices, they talked mostly about themselves, about students, and about school as preparation for life. Although some spoke favorably about a practice they had experienced, most parents had been exposed to a very limited number of different practices in their traditional classrooms. What Ronald Lancaster [a pseudonym as are all other parents' names included here] said about the practices he believed should be used in the ideal English class was probably true in varying degrees for most parents: "A lot of these ideas I'm talking about now are coming from my own experience--things I would like to have done, some things I did [but] I've done just a few."

Parents also drew upon the experiences of their own children and their perceptions of what students needed to survive and succeed in school and in the real world. Only one parent cited research studies as the basis for some of his views. Formerly a school administrator, Randall Cromwell advocated a greater emphasis on oral communication because he had looked at studies of "success models" which showed "correlations between what they found in school and successful people....CEO's...don't write or read, but they're scanning volumes of stuff and they have to communicate verbally."

The Criteria Parents Used To Evaluate Practices

Regardless of whether these parents talked about themselves, students in general, or the very specific needs of one of their own children, their explanations revealed that they were likely to view a practice as favorable to the extent they believed it was likely 1. to capture students' interest or engage them, 2. to address their needs and personal characteristics, 3. to have real-world relevance, and/or 4. to preserve a tradition. They sometimes used a combination of these criteria in one explanation because these categories may be interrelated rather than exclusive. Students, for example, would be more likely to be interested when a practice meshed well with their learning styles. All parents used the first three criteria at some point, but only a few said a practice was good because "that's the way we did it."

Although parents used similar criteria for evaluating the likely effectiveness of a certain practice, they interpreted and applied these criteria differently. Three factors may help explain these differences. The factor that seemed to have the greatest effect on differences in the ways parents interpreted and applied the criteria was the degree to which they perceived all students as having universal needs and characteristics. Because some parents did not believe that all students could learn best if they were taught the same curriculum in the same manner, they cited one practice as favorable for some students and another practice as best for others. The result was these parents cited a greater number of preferred practices and usually described them in greater detail than those parents who talked about students quite generally.

A second factor that seemed to affect the outcome of parents' judgments about curriculum and methods was their prior contact with or knowledge of different practices which usually came either from their own experience or their children's experience in school. While some parents cited only a few different practices, others mentioned a much greater variety of different practices. If parents did not know about or had not experienced a practice, they could not express a preference for it unless I introduced it in my question.

Parents' explanations indicated that they had gained knowledge about new practices in a variety of ways. For example, Ronald Lancaster's preference for progressive practices came as a result of his children's positive experiences with them in the ungraded elementary school in Eastland. Gary Mosher's recent experience in college business classes had introduced him to small-group discussion, a practice he viewed as beneficial for students. Differences in the knowledge parents had about different practices were also apparent when a parent had two

children who were very different or one child for whom traditional methods had not worked. These parents had discovered from their children's school experiences that the same methods did not work equally well for all children. Thus, because they tended to view students as having particular rather than universal characteristics, teachers would have to use many different methods to address students' diverse needs. Wherever their knowledge came from, those parents with more knowledge about different practices were the most likely to express a preference for a greater variety of practices and to describe them in more detail than others.

A third factor which seemed to have an effect on the different ways parents evaluated curriculum and methods was the time focus or perspective parents adopted during the interview. Even though parents may have commented on past, present, and future, in most cases, one perspective was more dominant in their explanations than others. Sandra Manchester, for example, was anchored to the past. Even though her daughter appeared to be doing quite well in writing without being required to outline her ideas first, she said students should do outlines because that was the way it was done when she went to school. On the other hand, Ralph Jones looked to the future: he cited examples from his current experience in the business world to show the negative consequences for not having learned in school. He used these to explain what and how students should learn now if they were going to be able to get and hold jobs in the future. Other parents, however, focused on the present and talked more about the learning process than its intended outcome. They tended to cite a greater variety of practices and to describe them in more detail than did the parents who adopted future or past time perspectives.

Parents' Perspectives on Whole-class and Small-group Discussions

Many teachers are now being encouraged to do less whole-class teaching and to adopt cooperative and collaborative practices in their classrooms. This study shows that parents may have very different views about the value of students working as a whole class and in small groups.

As a group the parents in this study believed that discussion was preferable to teacher lecture, but they did not agree on the form that discussion should take. They often explained their views about teacher-led, whole-class discussion by contrasting it with small-group discussion. Although no one viewed either practice as having no value, some parents favored one more strongly than the other.

How Class Time Should Be Spent: Individually working / Whole class / Small groups (n=25)		
Mix of three but most of time in small groups	9	36%
No time individually; even mix of whole class/small groups	6	24%
Mix of three but most of time as whole class	5	20%
Even mix of three	3	12%
Even mix individually and whole class; 10% small groups	1	4%
Ideal curriculum described not classroom-based	1	4%

Most parents favored using whole-class discussions in combination with small groups. Nearly every parent cited the importance of giving students an opportunity to express their opinions. Many said students would be reluctant to participate or get lost in a whole-class setting. Parents often explained their views about whole-class discussion by also talking about small groups. The table above shows how they thought students should be grouped during class. A majority of parents, believing that students should be actively engaged in learning when they were in class, thought that they were more likely to participate when they were given the opportunity to work in small groups rather than only as a whole class.

Two parents told of their own unsuccessful experiences in school to illustrate what can happen to some students when most or all of the instruction includes the whole class together.

Robert Foster, the son of Franco-American parents who spoke little English, dropped out of school in the fourth grade and never went back. He said:

> I hated everything. If, well, I'll put it this way. You see, I was in this situation here with all the kids. If there would have been only 3 or 4 of us, I probably would have had to do it....[H]ere I could get away with it more because there was more kids in there and she was paying attention to the other kids and I never raised my hand or anything. I didn't draw any attention.

High school dropout Betty Horton did not learn to read in school, and she indicated that never having anything but teacher lecture and whole-class discussions prevented her from learning:

> I couldn't read at all. I had everybody doing my homework.... They were just pushing you right along anyway....If [my daughter] was in a regular class of like say 20 kids, she drifts off. If she doesn't hear what he's talking about, then she's totally lost....I think it's good now that they do have little, you know, four people here, four people there. [So you can't fake it?] That's right."

Betty Horton seemed to think her own daughter, who had a learning disability, was learning more in school than she did primarily because her daughter had the opportunity to work most of the time in small groups. While she was the most enthusiastic about small groups, her views were shared by many other parents. Unlike most other parents, though, Betty had visited the school and watched her daughter in the classroom. One benefit she cited was that students can help each other learn:

> I've noticed with my daughter that a lot of ...kids, if my daughter looks like she's got a dumbfounded look on her face, they'll lean over and said, "You do this and you do that. This is how you do it." And she'll do it just like that. But you give her a paper, she's totally blown. Like in the groups she gets a lot of help from other kids because that's what the group is for. And if the teacher can't always be at the group....she gets a lot of help in the group.

Small groups can also benefit students in another way. Alex Lamonte, perhaps because he was a college graduate and better educated than Betty Horton, saw the small-group structure as a way of helping students process what they were learning:

> [In] small groups--everybody has time to express themselves....[W]ith 30 kids....the dominant kids get up and the teacher notices them, the teacher gets the right answer, and she gets positive feedback. Other kids don't. The smartest kids and the most aggressive get all the attention. [In small groups] they can take little meaning units and manipulate what they've learned in different ways and try using it in a real-life setting.

Small Groups Problematic for Some Parents

Even though many parents saw small groups as a good way for students to learn, small groups could be problematic. Mary Andrews was one of several parents interviewed who raised questions about fairness with regard to students working in small groups: "Those I have a real problem with.....It seems as though one person does all the work and the other three people just

don't do anything....And they get a poor grade because it's supposed to be a group effort, but half of them didn't do the work." She went on to explain a recent situation involving her daughter to support her view that small groups were not good. Then I asked if she thought students could learn in small groups if the work were shared equally. She said: "Oh, yeah....it gives you more ideas in doing the project if you've got more than just your own thoughts....[E]verybody gets something different out of a book....So you'd get different ideas, different people's views on it....Everybody gets a chance to share their views this way [more than in a whole-class discussion]."

Some other parents, who also mentioned the problem of fairness with small groups, cited that as one reason teachers must monitor small-group work. Only six parents (24%) said students should work in groups on their own as long as the task was clearly defined because students needed to learn to work independently. A majority (84%) stressed the need for the teacher to be there frequently, if not all of the time, so that "they won't get off the track of what they're there for." The teacher should "move from group to group" and keep students "focused." Sally Branigan, an elementary teacher who understood firsthand the difficulties of making small groups work effectively, explained the teacher's role in greater detail:

> I think this is good to have a teacher monitoring what is going on with the discussion instead of just saying, "OK, guys, go to it!" and never listening to what's happening so they can see if each student is giving information or to find out if all the students know what's going on....They all have to be accountable. With my first graders I make sure they're all accountable. I say, "You all have to know what I expect from you, you have to make sure he knows it, he has to make sure you know it." I think that's needed.

Differences in Views about Small Groups for Literature and for Writing

These parents favored the use of small groups for literature/reading quite strongly, but they questioned the value of small groups for writing instruction. As parents explained the practices they preferred for writing instruction, they expressed the most uncertainty about the value of student feedback.

A majority (80%) believed the teacher's feedback on writing was best. Perhaps because most parents had not had the opportunity to write drafts and then meet in small groups to get feedback from other students, they were not sure whether or not student feedback would be helpful. Thus, for them, the teacher was the one with expert knowledge who could best help students improve their writing. In some cases, parents paused to think about the idea of students helping each other before they responded. Overall, 14 parents (56%) finally decided that student feedback/small groups would be helpful, but 11 (44%) viewed student feedback as not helpful or of limited help.

Parents gave several reasons for having students get feedback from the teacher. The Branigans illustrate the two most common responses of other parents. Kurt Branigan said it was important because "they have more expertise." His wife Sally agreed and added, "And they know what they want." Teacher feedback then was important on drafts because teachers knew best, especially when it came to correcting errors in punctuation and usage, and, since they would assign the final grade, students would benefit from knowing what specific changes to make in order to earn better grades.

Some parents thought the teacher should be the one to give feedback because students not only lacked the knowledge and skill to help each other, they would be reluctant to do so. Katie Pennell, for example, said: "[I]f it's your friend's paper, you wouldn't want to make

comments. You know, they have a lot of social things going on--how they feel about each other has a lot to do with that." Karen Shelley was concerned about students' need for privacy, an issue no one else raised. "If they were writing a letter, let's say to a senator, they might have different opinions and I think sometimes letters should be private. Nobody would say, 'Did you see what they wrote down?'" It would be all right, she said, for students to share essay drafts with peers.

Some parents, however, did believe that students could benefit from getting feedback from their peers. Nora Kendall, a high school dropout, explained how discouraged she was as a student when her papers came back with "all kinds of red marks everywhere." Her teachers did not allow her to get help from anyone else, a practice she would like to see changed. "Kids explain things better than adults do....[I]f a child knows more than another child and they're friendly enough and they want to help each other, I think that's great." She noted that help can come from other sources, too: "[W]hen they're writing out something, they should be able to ask questions of their parents or their peers."

Fourth grade dropout Roland Foster made a distinction made by no one else, one I at first had difficulty in understanding. It took several minutes for me to figure out that he saw a difference between getting help from other students and what he seemed to think of as cheating. At first he said: "I don't think they should [help each other] because...Let's say I'm doing something and why should I get it corrected before I turn it in by somebody else? Well, why not just have that person turn it in?...It's like a test. If you've got to take a test, there's nobody going to be helping you. Right?...[T]he end results, what you did there, that's it. The bottom line." Because the practice of sharing drafts with peers was not something Roland Foster ever experienced in the few years he spent in school a long time ago, it was not surprising that his first reaction to that practice was to think of it as cheating.

Overall, parents' comments reflect their belief that teacher expertise or knowledge was more important for writing instruction than for reading/literature study. Technical knowledge which students might not have was required for correcting errors in sentence structure and punctuation. Thus, students lacked the background to give each other much help with writing. On the other hand, because no parent believed that a book had only one meaning, students could develop a better understanding of something they had read by sharing their own views with each other. In the writing classroom the teacher was the authority, the one who knew the correct way to punctuate a sentence, for example. In the reading classroom, however, the teacher's role was different. She would function more as a monitor or facilitator, the one who kept students on task or asked questions which led students to look at things differently. She may have more knowledge about literature, but her view of a book was just another opinion.

Their differing perceptions of the teacher's role may be related to parents' lack of knowledge about the process approach to writing which many teachers are currently using in their classrooms. Most had not themselves experienced not had they seen students working together in small groups to read and comment on each other's drafts. Even though no parent would give more weight to mechanics than to content on the final grade for a paper, many parents talked about the importance of correct spelling and punctuation and said that teacher feedback was essential on these technical matters. Perhaps, then, they did not understand the draft as an intermediate step in the writing process in the way many teachers do. Teachers often have students work in groups to comment on content matters, such as organization and development, as preparation for revising their papers. They do not want students to deal with editing matters, such as spelling and punctuation, until later in the process. Because parents often talked about both content and mechanics simultaneously, they may not have been able to envision the possibility of students dealing only with content and not with mechanics.

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Major Observations

The examples cited in this paper and other data analyzed for this study suggest that educators engaged in efforts to restructure the high school classroom need to consider the perspectives of parents. What was true of the parents in this study may also be true for parents in other communities:

- Parents' preferences for classroom practices may not be as traditional as one might have thought, but some parents are likely to oppose the adoption of innovative practices, such as cooperative learning, included in educators' plans to restructure the high school classroom.
- Parents' preferences, which are based in part on their prior knowledge about classroom practices and personal experience with them, are often complex and idiosyncratic.
- Because parents have many different reasons for preferring or opposing certain practices, their preferences or opposition may not always mesh with other evidence of their underlying assumptions about the nature of teaching and learning.

Implications for Educators

The results of this study show that educators need to talk to parents to find out what they actually think and what they misunderstand or need to know. They should look beyond parents' initial comments or criticism to find the basis for their opposition because buried within may be the key to avoiding or resolving conflicts between educators and parents.

Surveys vs. Interviews

While the preferences of any group of parents are likely to differ, this study shows that parents' views are too complex and idiosyncratic to be accurately assessed by survey data alone. Conversation in a non-threatening environment is probably the only good way to discover what parents actually think about certain practices.

As parents talked, they revealed more about their beliefs than one could get from counting the choices they marked on a survey. These parents sometimes opposed practices that seemed to mesh well with other evidence of their underlying assumptions about teaching and learning. Without asking parents to explain their responses, one might misinterpret them or fail to see that disagreement about practices may be superficial. This study revealed that parents' responses are often too complex and idiosyncratic to be accurately assessed quantitatively. Thus, results from survey data may be misleading or incomplete.

If surveys are used to collect data, educators should also consider gathering some more in-depth personal responses to survey questions by interviewing some participants in their homes. Even though phone interviews would provide more information than printed forms, parents are likely to be most comfortable and open about sharing their views if they can do so on their turf. This point may be especially important with regard to those parents whose past involvement with the school has usually been the result of their children's school problems.

Focus on Outcomes vs. Focus on Process

Because there seems to be general agreement among parents about the intended outcomes of the learning process, educators who wish to avoid conflict can involve parents in discussions, such as the "visioning sessions" currently being conducted with parents and community members in many school districts. However, because such discussions may not uncover potential areas of disagreement about the process needed to reach the desired outcomes, these visioning sessions may be counterproductive.

First, a focus on outcomes may mask or avoid dealing with the conflicting views that would be apparent if parents were allowed to discuss particular issues, such as specific practices (heterogeneous grouping or interdisciplinary courses) involving their own children. The parents in this study, for example, all agreed that students should be active participants in the learning process and said that discussion was a good way to engage students. However, some favored mostly whole-class discussions led by the teacher while others were strong advocates for more small-group discussions. If parents are not also given an opportunity to discuss the ways outcomes might be reached, then educators may assume there is more common agreement than might actually be the case.

Second, and perhaps more important, the responses of parents in this study indicated that those parents who seemed more willing than others to change their preferences talked more about the learning process than its intended outcomes. Other parents--the ones who expressed their views with the most certainty and most often preferred a very traditional approach to teaching and learning--tended to emphasize outcomes and ignore process. Parents in this latter group were the ones who were least likely to support innovative practices because they did not seem to understand how a non-traditional approach would lead to the outcomes they desired. By keeping parents focused only on outcomes, educators may in fact prevent them from developing the new understandings about teaching and learning which might lead them to support the changes educators want to make.

Parents as Learners

Educators may have a better chance of winning parents' support for innovative practices if they give parents opportunities to learn about new practices. Rather than attempting to avoid conflict by looking only at outcomes, educators may be able to manage or prevent conflict by thinking of parents as potential learners. Lightfoot (1978), for instance, even points out that "conflict is potentially constructive...[in] resolving differences" (p. 189). Many parents who are critical of current practices may need only to see how unfamiliar processes can lead to the intended outcomes they desire. Educators may be able to help these parents develop some new understandings about teaching and learning by engaging them in activities in which they will learn about practices different from those they have experienced.

There are many ways parents might like learn about unfamiliar practices. These are just a few possibilities:

- Invite parents to participate in focus groups (commonly used by business) so they can provide feedback and learn about innovations **before** a change, such as an American Studies course, is adopted.
- Use routine parent meetings to help parents understand how non-traditional classroom practices actually work. At PTA or booster club meetings small-group process could be used to conduct regular business and then parents could be told how students in small groups learn in literature, history, or biology classes.
- Make parent conferences an opportunity for learning by inviting parents to ask questions about teaching methods. Or, even better, as some teachers have already discovered, let students themselves show and explain the work in their personal portfolios to parents.
- Conduct special workshops to introduce new methods to parents as well as teachers or invite parents to visit when school is in session. (Many parents imagine that schools are worse than they really are.)
- Encourage teachers to explain teaching methods and rationales for them to students. For example, English teachers can tell students why sharing drafts with peers is better than working alone and how worrying about spelling on a first draft may hinder writing. Experienced teachers also know they can't **assume** students understand; they need to check. Since parents get most

information about school from their children who can be very unreliable informants, this practice should help prevent some confusion and misunderstanding.

- Suggest that teachers write a letter to parents at the beginning of the year introducing themselves and their methods, explaining course requirements, and suggesting ways parents can help. Follow-up letters, perhaps to describe a new unit or a special project, can be sent to parents later in the year. But in all communications with parents, they should do their very best to avoid using educational jargon!
- Publish student work as widely as possible: in the classroom, in the lobby of the local bank, or in the newspaper. Have students produce a class newsletter that goes home to parents.

Parents as Partners in Change

By helping parents learn about unfamiliar practices and focusing their attention on the process of learning in relation to its intended outcomes, educators may be able to help parents understand how process and intended outcome can be viewed as two integrated aspects of the same conceptual entity. Parents in this study favored those practices that they thought would enable their children to develop the skills and knowledge they believed children needed to succeed in school and prepare them for the future. They opposed those which appeared to hinder their children in this regard. If educators can help them see how the process of engaging in a new classroom practice will eventually lead students to a desired outcome, they will be likely to support it.

Just as many educators now believe that students must be active participants if they are to learn, parents must be actively involved and engaged. Parents are unlikely to learn new ways of thinking about teaching and learning if their knowledge is limited to what they read in newsletters and other written communications from the school. When parents get letters or notices riddled with jargon, they are likely be frustrated or further confused rather than informed. The ritualistic contacts Lightfoot (1978) discusses, such as PTA meetings and parent conferences, are also not likely to help parents learn unless they are organized and run in a very different way. Lightfoot maintains that these contacts often serve to keep the "boundaries" between home and school in place; they do little or nothing to build "bridges" between the two.

As educators engage in changing school practices, they should view parents as potential learners rather than problems or critics. Fullan (1991) argues that everyone needs to develop their own meanings of change, but pedagogical issues are rarely discussed. He says that one of the best ways for parents to develop an understanding of a new program is through "direct involvement with their own child's education," which often happens at the elementary level though classroom volunteering and home tutoring (p. 237).

Because parent involvement tends to decrease as children move up through the grades, high school educators face a greater challenge. Nonetheless, if parents are to be supportive of the restructured classroom, high school educators must find ways to bring more parents into closer contact with the school in general and the instructional process in particular. Parents need to develop knowledge about the purpose of a particular change and the process used to implement it. Fullan believes that activities which enable teachers, parents, and students to develop their own individual meanings of change also offer the group an opportunity "to achieve shared meanings" (p. 209).

It seems clear from the results of this study that more research on parents' perspectives is greatly needed, especially in larger communities more culturally and socio-economically diverse than the community in this study. Educators know very little about the educational views of parents, especially those of high school students, because the number of previous studies is so small. Other studies should be conducted to see whether conversation is a useful strategy for

understanding the complex and idiosyncratic views of individual parents and perhaps also for encouraging them to change their thinking about specific practices.

Conclusion

Although there is a great deal of rhetoric about the importance of involving parents in efforts to effect change in schools, the reality is that most parents have not been active participants in the process. Fullan (1991) maintains that parent involvement should be a "fundamental part of the definition and mission of an effective schools...not an add-on" (p. 249). He argues further that understanding the subjective world of individuals is a necessary precondition for engaging in any change effort with them because these phenomenological barriers are the most difficult to overcome. As the results of this study have shown, however, some parents may not be as great a barrier to change as many educators may think.

Many, perhaps most, parents and educators have incomplete--even erroneous or distorted--understandings of the others' perspectives. Because they have had so few opportunities for sharing their views on the process and desired outcomes for children's education, they have no way of really knowing how much they share or how conflicts between them might be resolved.

As long as educators and parents do not know how the other views teaching and learning, the boundaries between them will remain. Long-held views are not easily changed, but through the simple act of talking and listening to each other, parents and educators may discover that they have much more in common than they previously thought. As they develop shared meanings and new understandings about curriculum and classroom practices, educators and parents can begin to erase the boundaries and instead build bridges between home and school.

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